



The child's name is Mélodie.

Long ago, before Mélodie was born, her pretty mother had had a stab at composing music.

Mélodie is ten years old and she's trying to eat a sandwich. She prises apart the two halves of the sandwich and stares at the wet, pink ham inside, and at the repulsive grey-green shimmer on its surface. All around her, in the dry grass and in the parched trees, crickets and grasshoppers are making that sound they make, not with their voices (Mélodie has been told that they have no voices) but with their bodies, letting one part vibrate against another part. In this place, thinks Mélodie, everything is alive and fluttering and going from one place to another place, and she dreads to see one of these insects arrive suddenly on her sandwich or on her leg or start to tangle its limbs in her hair.

Mélodie's hair is dark and soft. As she looks at the

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slimy ham, she can feel sweat beginning to seep out of her head. Sweat, she thinks, is a cold hand that tries to caress you. Sweat is something strange inside you trying to creep from one place to another place . . .

Mélodie puts the sandwich down in the dusty grass. In moments, she knows, ants will arrive and swarm round it and try to carry it away. Where she used to live, in Paris, there were no ants, but here, where her new home is, there are more ants than you could ever count. They come out of the earth and go down into it again. If you dug down, you would find them: a solid mass of them, black and red. Your spade would crunch right through them. You might not even have to dig very deep.

Mélodie lifts her head and gazes at the leaves on the oak tree above her.

These leaves are yellowing, as though it were already autumn. The wind called the mistral keeps blowing through the tree and the sun keeps moving and piercing the shade and nothing in this place ever ends or is still.

‘Mélodie,’ says a voice. ‘Are you all right? Don’t you want your sandwich?’

Mélodie turns to her teacher, Mademoiselle Jeanne Viala, who sits on a rug on the grass a few paces away, with some of the younger children hunched up near to her, all obediently chewing their baguettes.

‘I’m not hungry,’ says Mélodie.

‘We’ve had a long morning,’ says Mademoiselle Viala. ‘Try to eat a few mouthfuls.’

Mélodie shakes her head. Sometimes, it’s difficult to speak. Sometimes, you’re like an insect with no voice,

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which just has to make a movement with some part of its anatomy. And everywhere around you the mistral keeps blowing and autumn leaves keep falling, even though it's a midsummer day.

'Come and sit here,' says Mademoiselle Viala. 'We'll all have a drink of water.'

The teacher tells one of the boys, Jo-Jo (one of those who tease and bully Mélodie and imitate her posh Parisian accent), to pass her the picnic bag. Mélodie gets up and moves away from the sandwich lying in the grass and Mademoiselle Viala holds out her hand and Mélodie sits down there, near the teacher whom she quite likes, but who betrayed her this morning . . . yes she did . . . by making her look at things she didn't want to see . . .

Mademoiselle Viala wears a white linen blouse and blue jeans and white canvas shoes. Her arms are soft and tanned and her lipstick is a bright, startling red. She could have come from Paris, once. She takes a little bottle of Evian water out of the cumbersome bag and passes it to Mélodie.

'There,' she says. 'There you are.'

Mélodie presses the cool bottle against her cheek. She sees Jo-Jo staring at her. Bully-boys' faces can be blank, absolutely blank, as though they'd never learned to say their own names.

'So,' says Jeanne Viala in her teacher-voice, 'I wonder who can tell me, after the presentations we saw at the museum, how silk is made?'

Mélodie looks away, up, sideways, far away at the jumping light, at the invisible wind . . . All round her, the children

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raise their arms, bursting to tell Mademoiselle Viala what they know, or what, Mélodie suspects, they have *always* known, because they're part of this landscape and were born out of its earth.

Jo-Jo says it: 'Silk is made by worms.'

He, like the others, always knew it. Everybody learned about it from their grandparents or great-grandparents and only she, Mélodie Hartmann from Paris, had never ever thought about it until today, until Jeanne Viala took the children to the Museum of Cévenol Silk Production at Ruasse . . .

'Right,' says Mademoiselle Viala. 'Don't all shout out at once. *You* tell me, Mélodie. Imagine you wanted to breed a healthy crop of silkworms, what would be the first thing you would do, once you'd bought the eggs?'

*The first thing.* She looks down at her hands, which are dirty with sweat and dust – with human mud.

'Keep them warm . . .' She whispers it. Her voice smaller than the voice of some tiny creature living between two stalks of corn, or underneath a tree root.

'Yes,' says Jeanne Viala. 'Good. And how would you do that?'

Mélodie wants to say: I said my answer. I said it. I don't want to say any more of it. But she just keeps looking down at her muddy hands, clutching the Evian bottle.

'I know!' says Jo-Jo.

'We know!' say two girls, two inseparable friends, Stéphanie and Magali.

'Go on then, Magali, you tell us,' says Jeanne Viala.